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## Poems

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## Poems

### Abstract

WOOROLOO, THE FACE, OPERATION, THIEF, CHANGES

# Frieda Hughes

## WOOROLOO

Wild oats pale as peroxide lie down among  
The bottle brushes. A beaten army, bleaching.  
Life bled into the earth already, and seeds awaiting,  
Stiff little spiked children wanting water.

Above the creek that split apart the earth  
With drunken gait and crooked pathway,  
Kookaburras sit in eucalyptus. Squat and sharp-throated  
They haggle maggots and branches from ring-neck parrots.

I have watched the green flourish twice, and die,  
And the marsh dry. In this valley I have been hollowed out  
And mended. I echo in my own emptiness like a tongue  
In a bird's beak. My words are all gone.

Out of my mouth comes this dumb kookaburra laugh.  
How my feathers itch.

## THE FACE

Born blank, it was made up by children,  
At school, with wax crayons  
And small fingers sticky with sugar  
From half-eaten chocolate.

It was scribbled on at home,  
His mother's notepad. Thrown-away words  
Sank pock-marks in those soft, white features,  
Until he saw himself, a mass of chewed gum  
And other people's pieces.  
He had been added to by everyone,  
Their fingerprints tattooed him.

Old enough to shave,  
He took the blade and made  
His own shape from his chin,  
He sank his cheeks and sculpted creases in.  
He made his face a famous thing  
Until it was the signature  
With which he built his prison.

## OPERATION

My head is lead, neck all bent  
When I try to lift this melon,  
I have no control. The stalk drags its fruit.  
Sullen, he sits on the bed edge  
Watching me helpless.

I am a damp moth with wings sticking to sheets,  
Folded in creases – my chrysalis is split open  
But a tube anchors me,  
Leaking into my blood from a plastic bladder,  
I am diluting.

He waits for me to connect my parts.  
A leg slides to the floor, only minutes now  
Until they lock the door, lock me in, leave me staring  
Into the dark and seeing the needle  
Sewn in to the open hole in my hand.

I hold still the medicine ball  
That sags between my shoulders and sit,  
Like a top-heavy hinge.  
A small clown in open back gown,  
Pale face and blood spots across my belly.

Each wound hole knitted with a single stitch,  
Closing the small mouths of protesting flesh  
In two bloody pouts. I am unhooked and escaping.  
Each arm a dead albatross rooted in a shoulder blade,  
Each leg a tree dragging mud and earth.

I am a monster of pieces.  
My spirit watches from the corner  
And follows at a distance,  
Doesn't recognise its home,  
I am alone.

## THIEF

It was years before I dug her out  
From where her shadow lay, like a bloodstain  
Beneath the black stones I had  
Weighted her down with.

Her smile was crooked,  
She had been dead awhile.

Back then, when the small child watched,  
She said she was a relative. She beckoned,  
A sweet promise coated the lips that kissed, like honey,  
But her eyes were empty already.

When the child reached small hands  
Into those holes, she found nothing  
Behind the sounds the mouth made,  
But the tongue flapping.

'Come live with me!' it cried,  
Nostrils spread above like nose wings  
As if the face would take off from its neck-end  
Like a ghastly bald crow.

Seeing her mother was a shadow not hearing,  
The father not found  
To know his daughter was disappearing,  
The child became blank, wiped clean like a pale sea stone.

Made herself as hollow as a dead tree,  
Not worth having.  
Her days were as lost as marbles, even her name  
Had rolled between a crack in the floorboards.

She was stolen after all, and in her silence  
The visitor grew dim. Uncertain. Receded like a dull fox  
Just before dawn, barely left a scent behind  
On door frames and bed linen, then was gone.

## CHANGES

I wore another woman once.  
She arrived in a bucket of dye;  
And began as a blond streak  
With a blush like a carrot.

There I was, face beaten by the cold  
In a cut-off winter, and a six-foot hearth  
Burning paper left by the last supper:  
The boyfriend, his girlfriend, her boyfriend

Eating without me.  
Their chicken bones left to spit and crack  
With the books and the bills and the savings certificates  
Of total strangers. I was warm for two weeks.

This woman woke,  
The streak had spread, her head was red,  
Her face like stone. She swept up her ashes  
And dressed differently.

She borrowed me awhile.  
In fact, I had to take me back  
When she married without me  
And left me holding the husband.

It was only a very small box,  
But the bottle inside poured me out  
And coloured me in. I was found at last, in my own skin,  
Still wearing her creases.